

CASTLE ACRE.

By GEO. T. CLARK.

Castle Acre, so called in distinction from West and South Acre, contiguous parishes in the north-eastern parts of Norfolk, is best known to antiquaries as the Caput of the 140 Lordships held by Earl Warren, at Domesday, in that county, but the earthworks to which parish and manor owe their prefix claim a much earlier history, not, indeed, written upon parchment, nor engrossed upon the records of the realm, but not less authentic, nor less legible to an instructed eye.

The Nar, the rivulet of the district, on its way from its not distant sources to its name-children of Narford and Narborough, here winds sluggishly across a level bottom, now a well-ordered water-meadow, but in ancient times a broad and impracticable morass. Taking advantage of so convenient a front a large camp has been formed on the rising ground to the north or right bank of the river. It is in plan a parallelogram about 280 yds. north and south, by 380 yds. east and west, or in strictness north-north-west and south-south-east. The defence was a single earth-bank, ranging from 6 ft. to 12 ft. in height, and protected externally by a deep ditch, the two covering together a breadth of about 30 yds. The northern front runs parallel and on the side of the village street, and is in consequence indistinct, though traceable. The western and most perfect front passing from the street straight towards the river, has the Parish Church of St. James a few yards to its west or outside it, while about 300 yds. to the south-west is what remains of the Cluniac Priory of St. Mary, St. Peter, and St. Paul.

The south or river front, having the morass for its defence, seems to have had a slighter bank, of which

only parts remain. What should be the angle at the junction of the two sides is rounded off in the Roman manner, and is tolerably perfect, and the only angle that is so.

Although the eastern half of the camp has been materially altered, enough remains to shew that this was a regular Roman fortification, having two entrances, in the centre of the northern and southern or longer sides, of which the latter opened upon the morass, here about 100 yds. broad, and traversed by a causeway leading to a bridge across the river; and the former was approached by a long straight road, probably of the date of the camp, running north-north-east, and known as Peddar way.

The Saxon invaders who founded and inhabited the villages hereabouts were minded to take advantage of earthworks, the position of which was so well chosen, and which admitted of being altered to suit their notions of defence. The area, however, was too spacious for their wants, and the earthworks by no means of what they considered necessary strength. They therefore took possession of the eastern half of the work and converted it into the Burh in use among them in the ninth century, and of which so many examples are found in various parts of England, and among their distant kinsman in Normandy.

In the north-east quarter of the camp they threw up a conical mound about 25 or 30 ft. high, and having a flat top 40 yds. in diameter. This they surrounded with the ditch out of which, in fact, it was in great measure formed, and appended to it on the north-east and south sides were two courts, also embanked and moated by ditches which communicated with the ditch of the mound. The smaller of these courts, or wards, that to the north-east, somewhat lunated in form, had an area of about 30 yds. by 40 yds. The larger was about 130 yds. from north to south, and in breadth about 100 yds. To complete this court a bank was thrown up across the old camp from north to south. The house and offices of the chief, of timber, occupied the table top of the mound, and a line of stout palisades ran along the crest of the earthbanks, and possibly along the counterscarp of their ditches.

There is also some reason to think that the palisades were continued along the untouched Roman bank, so as to convert the remainder or western half of the camp into an additional place of safety for the adjacent husbandmen and their cattle. A work such as that above described possessed considerable passive strength, and in the hands of a small but resolute garrison might defy an army for a few days, as the Burh at Towcester is recorded in the Saxon chronicle to have done. Such was, no doubt, the stronghold that Earl Warren found ready to his hands, not unlike what he had already become possessed of at Lewes, and such as his fellow Normans found at Arundel and Tonbridge, and were familiar with on their own estates in Normandy.

The use of masonry in fortifications was then a novelty in Normandy, and probably had not been introduced into England, where, with the exception of a fragment of wall at Corfe, no military masonry of the Saxon age has been discovered. The rectangular keep, then the form of masonry most in favour, was only constructed on level ground, as in London and Malling, or where a natural hill formed a solid platform, as in the later structures at Dover, Bramber, or Norwich. The ordinary Saxon strongholds, of which there were very many, contained an artificial mound, upon which a lofty tower was unnecessary, and could not safely have been constructed. In such places the new structure took the form of the polygonal or shell keep, such as may be seen at Arundel or Cardiff, and of which the foundations remain at Berkhamstead and Tonbridge. Such a shell was erected at Castle Acre, and in part remains. It is composed of a wall 6 ft. thick, an irregular polygon in figure, 120 ft. diameter. Externally the angles are capped by broad flat pilasters in ashlar; internally the hollow angles are rounded. The wall is of chalk with thick facings of flint rubble. Outside, the lower part is built against the mound as a retaining wall, internally it seems to have been about 12 ft. high. Several fragments remain, some of their full height, with traces of a parapet about 4 ft. high. What resembles the pointed vault of a sewer is to be seen, so that probably the work is late Norman, as with such keeps was usual.

The central part of the area is hollow, as though there had been a well, but the whole surface slopes towards the south-east very considerably, and the fragments of wall show that this was so when the keep was built, so that the top of the wall was not intended to be level. The slope coincides generally with the lay of the ground outside, which is remarkable, seeing that the mound evidently is in part artificial.

The main or southern ward was walled in, and the wall, of which two fragments, 180 ft. and 80 ft. long, remain, was built upon the crest of the earthbank, and seems of the date and material of the keep. Each end of the curtain was brought up to the edge of the keep moat, and there carried across the ditch and up the bank, so as to join the wall of the keep. The space below the two walls includes about one-third of the circuit of the keep, which thus stands partly within and partly without the ward, which is a usual arrangement, as at Arundel, Tonbridge, and Lincoln. The north-east ward may have been walled in, but this is not probable; the ditch is crossed by a low wall, but it is of no great strength, and scarcely meant for defence. In the centre of the main ward are traces of foundations, probably of domestic buildings.

The entrance to this ward was on its west side, very near to the counterscarp of the ditch of the keep, and a wall seems to have been carried across the ditch and up the mound from it to the keep. A sketch by Mr. Kerrich in 1787 shews the gate-house tolerably perfect, and its remains are still to be seen. The main ditch in front of this gatehouse is now crossed by a regular causeway, replacing the former drawbridge.

The outer gate, of later date, stands near the centre of the Roman earthwork, on the north front, in the present village, but the Normans did not think it necessary to wall in the whole area of the camp. It seems probable, however, that they enclosed it with some kind of defence, possibly a palisade.